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ABSTRACT

The rationale and uses of a checklist for evaluating essays from a second semester college composition course are described in this paper. The checklist has 23 yes/no items organized by subject: content, organization, and mechanics. A scoring rubric which assigns 30 points to the content items and 10 to each of the others is used to convert results on the checklist into letter grades for each paper. Copies of the checklist and of an earlier research version are included as appendices. (AA) appendices. (AA)

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A Theme Check-form Method of Evaluation and Instruction

No doubt, most of us teachers of composition have toyed with the idea of utilizing some objective form for checking themes, and have from time to time experimented with some form of our own devising, found it insufficient for two dozen reasons, and gone back to marginal and end commentaries as the only hope of helping students to become better writers. I had long since given up the idea of using a check-form when I ran across an instance of such a form's being employed in a study reported by Arthur M. Cohen ("Assessing College Students' Ability to Write Compositions," Research in the Teaching of English, VII, No. 3, 1973, pp. 356-371). That encounter led me to devise my own "practical" theme check-form and to draw several conclusions with respect to its proper application.

The Cohen form (Appendix A) was the outgrowth of a workshop directed by him at UCLA. The purpose of the workshop was simply to determine whether instruction in composition actually helped students to become better writers. The form was developed by the members of the workshop and utilized in their own classrooms in order to collect the data from which Cohen was to draw conclusions regarding the primary goal of the study. Cohen

stresses that the form was utilized only by people who had helped devise it and so knew and were agreed upon the meanings of its entries and could apply it reliably. Among his conclusions, Cohen notes that the "design can apparently be used to assess change in students' ability to write," but that "if it were applied to a pair of compositions written by a single student, it would be of little value" (p. 369). He has other reservations about the use of his "key." For example, he notes that some instructors "apparently feel that composition cannot be divorced from the writer and that judging a composition without knowledge of the writer himself is not valid" (370).

Regardless of Cohen's reservations and warnings, I was intrigued by the possibilities his form held not only as a means of evaluating individual compositions, but also as an instructional device. I liked the three part division of his key and the dichotomous variables he had insisted on, and, drawing on my own experience, training, and dubious clairvoyance, I was able to decide upon the meaning of the items it listed. I did find it necessary to add some items of my own. I did so, ran off a few dozen copies and proceeded to use it in marking my next set of themes. It was a disaster.

Everything imaginable about it did not work. To begin with, using it took more time than I had been spending on themes because I found it necessary to write the same marginal and end notes anyway. The items on the form were so broad as to require amplification of particular students' problems, and even with

my additions, they did not always contain the appropriate items. Next, I had hoped to be able to use it to arrive at an objectively determined numerical score. No good. Papers that obviously "had something" too frequently failed to attain even approximately appropriate scores, while papers obviously too deficient would have passed. Finally, my next round of conferences showed that my hope that the students could and would find their errors if they were told the sort of problems to look for was, as I should have known, not only vain but downright foolish.

Licking my wounds, I resolved to see whether there were any solutions to these problems, and, through experimentation, the form I now use evolved (Appendix B). First, I added some succinct explanations to some of the items. In practice, I then found that items often could be particularized by underscoring appropriate sections of the explanations and by inserting a phrase or two on the form itself. Next, I located students' errors for them, either by circling the problem and writing the appropriate item number next to the circle, by writing the item number in the margin and on the line containing the problem, or by referring on the check-form to lettered marginal comments. Now, I sometimes use a combination of these methods. The scoring problem was more difficult to cure.

Originally, I had assigned ten points to each item and used the percentage of positive scores in order to arrive at a letter grade for the paper. The items I had added made such a procedure unfair, since they caused one section or another to be disproportionately weighted. "Content," particularly, suffered

as a result. I found that assigning thirty points to the "content" items and ten points to each of the others not only corrected this overbalance, but also placed a just ranking emphasis on the three sections. A student scores most points on "content," and least points on "mechanics." One cannot ignore mechanical difficulties, but surely we have all read papers that made good sense despite an occasional mechanical "slip" or even rampant errors.

Speaking of "slips," I next had to find some way to make allowance for the varying severity of student errors. For example, some students misspell every other word, while others simply overlook a misspelled word or two during proofreading. The problem was to find a way to make such an allowance while preserving the integrity of the "yes/no" format. I decided that a check in one column could denote the presence of a number of errors of a type sufficient to indicate a real problem in the composition. A check in both columns could indicate that the student had an error or two, but no real problem in compositon. The errors would thus be "mitigated" and the student would be "punished" for poor proofreading as much as for committing the errors. If the student had a severe problem, two checks in the same column could indicate as much. When scored this way, neither basically good nor basically poor compositions receive grades they do not deserve, flexibility withing the form is possible, and the form remains meaningful and useful.

The solution to the scoring problem also involved some mathematical juggling. My experiments with the form indicated that it was impossible to arrive at a fair letter grade score

by using simple percentages. What was needed was some fair and objective way to scale down passing percentages without grading on "the curve." I guessed that a 50% positive score should be the actual passing mark and devised a mathematical procedure to make it so (i.e., to make 50%=65%). My grading scale begins at 100%, which is, of course, an "A+." I assign three percentage points to each letter grade, so that 100, 99, and 98 percent all receive "A+'s." Working through the letter grades in this fashion, 92% is the lowest "A-," 83% is the lowest "B-," 74% the lowest "C-," 65% the lowest "D-," and 56% the lowest "F-." (For averaging purposes, "If ya got an 'A+,' ya gotta have an 'F-.'" Otherwise, the average of the highest and lowest grades is a "C+," not a "C.") To make 50% equal 65% (the lowest passing score), I added the total points possible on the form and divided by 35 (the difference between 65% and 100%) and arrived at 9.14 as a "factor number." Each percentage point between 65 and 100 is worth 9.14 check-form points. In order to determine the adjusted numerical score from the theme check-form, it is only necessary to find the difference between the positive scores and the negative scores, divide that difference by 9.14, and add or subtract the quotient to or from 65. For example, in the highly unlikely event that a student received checks in the "yes" column for each item, he would have a positive score of 140. Divided by the factor number, 9.14, this difference would yield a rounded-off quotient of 15, which would be added to 65. Thus, this student would receive a score of 80 (a "C+") on his theme. If the student had received "no" checks for each item, his score would

be 50 (65 minus 15), which I would call 56 (the lowest possible "F-"). I take care to explain how it all works through both class instruction and conferences, but I do all the figuring myself.

I have found that this mathematical adjustment results in scores that seem fair. On the whole, the letter grades it produces correspond favorably with the letter grades I would assign according to my former, more subjective theme grading practice. However, using this new method has made it clear to me that I am more human than I like to think, so using the form not only allows the students to see exactly where they have "lost points," but also shows me the good qualities I tend to overlook in students' papers because of their "egregious blunders."

One other point about scoring. I have said that it is highly unlikely any student would receive all "yes" or all "no" checks. In part, that is because it is unlikely that a student who had a range of problems broad enough to lose points on each "mechanical" item would be able to score well in all items under the other two categories. Additionally, however, there is a certain amount of dovetailing and double-checking built into the form. For example, a student who had no thesis (item 5) would have to receive negative checks on all items having to do with the thesis, while the presence of a thesis would in no way guarantee that the paper was well organized according to other thesis related check-form items. Nevertheless, the absence of a clearly stated thesis would not automatically doom a student to a failing grade. For instance, he could have finely wrought

individual paragraphs, he could write with grammatical and mechanical perfection, and he could demonstrate a grasp of the problem or subject at hand, despite the fact that he does not present his ideas in a thematically well-organized form.

Personally, I do not like grades. I feel they do more harm than good, and if I could get away with it, I would never put a score or a letter grade on a theme. (As it is, I often postpone actually scoring themes, being content to use the form merely to check the first few.) But there does not seem to be any way to get around grades, and if one is required to turn in a grade for a student at the end of a semester, it is my feeling that he must have something tangible to go on. Therefore, whether one grades on individual improvement or on cumulative average, he needs to be able to point to something tangible to justify his opinions. The check-form provides a more objective, although, of course, not completely so, criteria upon which to base such evaluations and to guage student progress. In addition, it has instructional value.

The form I have developed is utilized in a second semester composition course. Theoretically, students have already been instructed in the various elements of composition and are aware of the meanings of the terminology my form employs. I do not take theory for fact and have often found it necessary at least to remind my students of the things they should already know. I give them copies of the form early in the semester and learn from a discussion of its contents which students need review in what specific areas. In this way, both the students and I learn

the particular problems we must work on, and the course thus takes on a relevance it otherwise might not have.

My procedure in assigning themes is to discuss the problem for the assignment with respect to both the subject matter and the method of composition to be employed. The students then write their themes and bring them to class where they pair off and use the theme check form to evaluate each other's work. Thus, they have the opportunity to learn from their fellows and to practice checking their own work. Moreover, I include after each item on the check sheet the appropriate pages or sections of their rhetorics and usage handbooks, so that when they find a problem area, they will have a textbook source of help. Of course, I, too, am available to help them during these in-class checking sessions. They then have an opportunity to re-write their themes before submitting them for my evaluation. I evaluate them, using the check-form, return them, and have conferences with the students about their work. Then they re-write the themes and I re-evaluate them. Needless to say, the check-forms make a useful starting point for each of the various stages of this procedure. (A colleague who uses cassettes to comment on student themes plans to use this check-form as a supplement to his method.)

The check-form attached to this report is the one I use most frequently. Its focus is on the deductively structured theme. However, similar forms also can be utilized for instruction in the various kinds of paragraphs and in other kinds of theme structure, and whatever the form, my students have approved the use of check-forms for instruction and evaluation. It is true that some

find them "picky" and, despite my efforts at explanation, some never seem to understand the scoring formula, but, by and large, their responses to my open-ended questionnaires about the forms have been favorable, containing comments ranging from "good as any" to "would have helped in high school."

APPENDIX A

COHEN'S SCORE SHEET

	YES	NO		
Content I.	___	___	1.	Ideas themselves are insightful.
	___	___	2.	Ideas are creative or original.
	___	___	3.	Ideas are rational or logical.
	___	___	4.	Ideas are expressed with clarity.
Organization II.	___	___	5.	There is a thesis.
	___	___	6.	Order of thesis idea is followed throughout the essay.
	___	___	7.	Thesis is adequately developed.
	___	___	8.	Every paragraph is relevant to the thesis.
	___	___	9.	Each paragraph has a controlling idea.
	___	___	10.	Each paragraph is developed with relevant and concrete details.
	___	___	11.	The details that are included are well ordered.
Mechanics III.	___	___	12.	There are many misspellings.
	___	___	13.	There are serious punctuation errors.
	___	___	14.	Punctuation errors are excessive.
	___	___	15.	There are errors in use of verbs.
	___	___	16.	There are errors in use of pronouns.
	___	___	17.	There are errors in use of modifiers.
	___	___	18.	There are distracting errors in word usage.
	___	___	19.	The sentences are awkward.

CODE NO._____

APPENDIX P

THEME CHECK-FORM: Checks under both "yes" and "no" indicate positive or negative mitigation; points are added to both scores. Double checks indicate especially serious and/or excessive errors or exceptionally good works and double the score.
FACTOR NO.: 9.14

YES	NO		
			I. CONTENT
___	___	1.	(30) Follows general and specific instructions. (Papers which obviously do not deal with the assigned subject or problem will not be accepted.) (On time?)
___	___	2.	(30) Ideas themselves are insightful, creative, or original, whichever is applicable, so that the subject is made significant, interesting, and informative.
___	___	3.	(30) Ideas are rational or logical and, if appropriate, clearly deducible from the facts of the literary or other work under discussion.
___	___	4.	(30) Ideas are clearly and concisely expressed. Redundancy, rhetoric, padding, and jargon are avoided. (See items 23 & 24.)
			II. ORGANIZATION
___	___	5.	(10) There is a clearly stated thesis or indication of purpose, as applicable.
___	___	6.	(10) The paper has three sections: introduction, body, and conclusion. The introduction adequately prepares the reader for what follows, and the conclusion logically follows from the material preceding it.
___	___	7.	(10) The thesis adequately develops the central idea.
___	___	8.	(10) Each element in the thesis is distinct but logically consistent with and equal in weight to the others and requires a paragraph in development.
___	___	9.	(10) The thesis clearly indicates the method by which the central idea will be developed, and that method of development is acceptable within the terms of the assignment.
___	___	10.	(10) The order of the thesis idea is followed throughout the essay.
___	___	11.	(10) Every paragraph is relevant to the thesis, and that relevance is clearly indicated (FOCUS).
___	___	12.	(10) Each paragraph has a controlling idea/topic sentence.
___	___	13.	(10) Each paragraph is adequately developed. Sufficient details are included to establish or explain the controlling idea.
___	___	14.	(10) The details used to develop each paragraph are clearly relevant and concrete/specific.
___	___	15.	(10) The details of individual paragraphs and the elements of the theme itself are well ordered according to some general pattern of development, the pattern is acceptable within the terms of the assignment, and "flow" is maintained by the use of appropriate indicator words.
			III. MECHANICS
___	___	16.	(10) There are errors in manuscript mechanics.
___	___	17.	(10) There are misspellings.
___	___	18.	(10) There are punctuation errors.
___	___	19.	(10) There are sentence fragments, comma splices, and fused or run-on sentences.
___	___	20.	(10) There are errors in use of verbs.
___	___	21.	(10) There are errors in use of pronouns.
___	___	22.	(10) There are errors in use of modifiers.
___	___	23.	(10) There are distracting errors in word usage.
___	___	24.	(10) The sentences are awkward or lacking in coherence or unity.